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THE TEACHING OF *THE SKETCH BOOK*¹

ADA PALM

Peabody High School, Pittsburgh, Pa.

When teaching *The Sketch Book*, I have the class do just as much reading aloud as is possible, which, of course, may mean much or little. I usually contrive, however, to have it mean the former, even at the sacrifice of something important. If the time at my disposal absolutely forbids much class reading, I frequently make it part of the assignment that certain pages are to be read aloud to someone at home. If there is loud lamentation, as sometimes happens, and the boy insists there is positively no one on whom he may thus inflict himself, I tell him he has recourse to the much-tried, ever-patient bedpost or table leg. Compulsory reading is, I grant, of questionable value, but with few exceptions the reading is done with good grace and in many cases with keen enjoyment. I feel so strongly on this point because, in my opinion, if the boy leaves the study of Irving without hearing the easy, smoothly flowing sentences—and we must remember most of these inexperienced readers hear with the outer ear only—he has lost an essential part of the author's charm. Then, too, if much reading aloud is done, the boy is much more likely to catch the flavor of the writer's humor than if he depends upon the eye alone. I refer not to the passages where the fun is open and rollicking, but where it lies rather in the turn of a phrase or the unusual use of a word. For example, at times when there has been no reading aloud of the assignment, in order to test the pupil's thoroughness of preparation, I have asked such questions as this: What adjective does Irving use to describe the birch tree standing outside Ichabod's schoolhouse? Only a stray hand or two, that is all. The class is about as responsive to the fun in the word "formidable" as a collection of Chinese idols would be. The trouble is not that they cannot see the point—though I must confess I have been told that Irving uses the word

¹ A paper read before the English Association of the Upper Ohio Valley.

“formidable” because the tree was so big—but because they have not seen the word. But ask the same question after the assignment has been read aloud. There is no need now of performing an operation on the passage. Faces glow, eyes sparkle with a keen appreciation of the remark. Or again, when reading the Christmas sketches I have asked what Irving has to say about mince pie with much the same result as in the former instance. My point is that we must go pretty much into detail with a first-year pupil if we are to succeed in training him to get all there is on the printed page or even a small part of what is there, and my experience has led me to believe that reading aloud is invaluable training to that end.

Hand in hand with this is my practice of having much reproducing, both oral and written, especially of descriptive passages, when reading Irving. He offers abundant opportunity for it. There is a very vivid detailed description of the country Ichabod passes through on his way to the quilting, the brilliantly colored treasures of autumn proclaiming themselves on every side. This is the kind of passage I ask classes to reproduce, not in a general way merely, but in detail. The exercise is one that appeals to me because I feel that it is productive of good along so many lines. First, the failure on the part of the pupil to meet the requirement proves to him much more conclusively than anything a teacher might say that there has been some trouble with his preparation of the lesson; secondly, the putting of a choice passage into his own words is always an incentive to the pupil to good expression of thought; thirdly, the boy is not asked to do this many times before he realizes that if he is going to do it with any degree of satisfaction to himself or to his teacher, it will be not by a blind groping about for the words on the page, but it will be by describing the picture that hangs on the wall of his brain. In other words, it teaches him that in reading he must close his eyes and see pictures. Of course he does not hold all the details in his mind for very long, but that is a thousand miles away from the point. He has learned to spread the wings of his imagination, than which, to my mind, there are few things of greater value gained in the study of English. And, in passing, I might say that occasionally I have an experience which bids me dare to hope that pupils do remember more than we think

they do. Not long ago while teaching *Silas Marner* to a second-year class, when we came to that perfect vignette of Raveloe, "a village where many of the old echoes lingered undrowned by new voices," I asked them if the description made them think of any other village they had visited in literature. Though I gave them no hint whatever and though they had read Irving a whole year before, many answered that it made them think of the village in *Sleepy Hollow*. Moreover, many could tell how Irving describes his village and the figure of speech he uses in picturing it. To me this was quite comforting, and thus I pass it on to you.

I believe that while teaching *The Sketch Book*, I do as much toward cultivating the dictionary habit as I do with all the other classics of the first year taken together. Of course, while studying Poe, we send the pupils to the dictionary times without number, and perhaps we should frown upon them with all the ferocity we can summon when they fail to rise to the occasion upon meeting a page profusely ornamented with scoriac, phantasmagoric, hypochondriac, and a score of others alike fearfully and wonderfully made. Personally, however, I am free to confess I pass over them as lightly as possible, as far as accurate meaning of words is concerned, and take my pupils to more inviting pastures. But not so with Irving. He affords such splendid opportunity, it seems to me, for a practical study of words, many of which the pupil takes at once into his working vocabulary. The pages of *The Sketch Book* abound in Latin derivatives. It is a comparatively easy matter to interest the child in these, especially when, as is frequently the case, he recognizes the root, and the meaning of a word thus discussed is likely to remain his permanent possession. Not only is this true, but it helps in some way, slight though it be, to do away with the more or less current belief that the study of Latin is waste of time, and anything we can do to annihilate this idea I am sure the Latin teacher will appreciate.

As to technical discussions regarding the tales structurally, there are almost none in my classes. Of course it is quite impossible for the class to study them in any adequate manner and not recognize some of their virtues, but what I mean is that we do not critically dissect the stories as such. Occasionally a particularly alert

lad, one perchance in whom the short-story germ is sprouting, protests vehemently against looseness in the plot of *Rip Van Winkle*, but unless some member of the class brings up the matter, the discussion is never raised. Perhaps in this particular instance this is due not so much to the fact that I feel that criticism is not the work of the first-year student as it is to the fact that I have not the heart to pick flaws in *Rip Van Winkle*.

I try to stay in the background as much as possible when teaching Irving. At present I am teaching the *The Sketch Book*. A few weeks ago my classes finished studying *The Lady of the Lake*. Reading the works thus in succession, I could not fail to note that my attitude toward the class has been decidedly different in the handling of the two. According to their own statement most of the pupils enjoyed Scott, but I noticed that if I left them with him for very long at a time, everybody went to sleep. I enjoy teaching *The Lady of the Lake*, but I am haunted almost continually by the fear that while teaching it, I loom up so big in my endeavor to act as medium between poet and pupil that I shut the poet from view almost entirely. Perhaps this is because it is poetry; perhaps it is because I do not know how to teach it. At any rate, I do not have that feeling while teaching Irving. They like him; and they like him, I am sure, not because of me.

In order to make the intercourse between writer and pupil as intimate as possible, sometimes when studying those sketches which most thoroughly reveal the author's thoughts and feelings, I have asked the class to prepare a list of fifteen or twenty questions on the pages assigned. The lesson hour is then largely in the hands of the pupils; the questions determine the bent of the recitation; and the teacher, aside from extending a guiding hand now and then, is merely an interested auditor. This, as an occasional exercise, it seems to me, has many things in its favor, not the least of them being that it brings the pupil face to face with a man who is well worth knowing.